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Jensen, Jens

Report to the Women's league for the protection...

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[1916]

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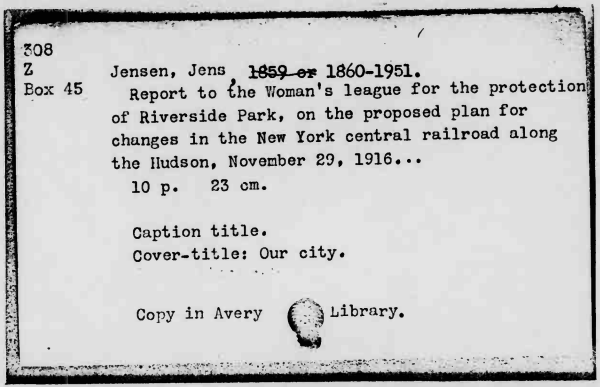

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Gift of the

OUR CITY

"Men did not love Rome because she was great. She was great because they had loved her"

REPORT

TO THE

WOMAN'S LEAGUE FOR THE PROTECTION OF RIVERSIDE PARK

ON THE

PROPOSED PLAN FOR CHANGES IN THE NEW YORK CENTRAL RAILROAD ALONG THE HUDSON

BY

JENS JENSEN

Landscape Architect, Chicago.

November 29, 1916.

In submitting this report I wish to state that it is based entirely on the esthetic value of Riverside Park, as an expression of the finer arts and as a playground for the people of New York City. These are the only bases on which the standard of the park can be justly judged. Parks are the outcome of civilization. I am not blind to the necessities and demands of commerce and the industries, nor do I deny that they are the very means through which parks are created, but it is they also that necessitate the development of parks and playgrounds in our congested cities of human habitation. New York has done well, indeed, for its commerce, almost giving up its entire water-front for this purpose. There can be no justifiable demands made by the railroads or business men of New York City for further encroachment upon the few miles of water-front left—water-front which has been so wisely set aside for a breathing space for the public. Therefore, I expect no objection from a business world that employs common sense in its work, nor from those who claim to have superior intellect and culture, when I state that the various

influences of the out-of-doors are as essential to the full development of the intelligent human being as are other educational means.

The intellect and refinement of any community are measured by its interest in the fine arts. Parks are one of the great expressions of an intelligent community life. Parks, as well as architecture, painting, sculpture, have standards by which they are valued, and the nearer the standard reaches that of a masterpiece, the greater its value to humanity, and the dearer its possession. It is on this standard that I have based the following report.

The bluffs of the Hudson, as represented in Riverside Park, bold and powerful, show the work of ages from the far distant geological times, and are in themselves a masterpiece. They link us to the great past, back to unknown ages. They express the power and force of the elements; they represent a book of knowledge that no living man can produce. These bluffs have not only a character of their own, as far as the rock surface is concerned, but, wherever the native vegetation has left flower characteristics of these rocky bluffs, they represent a distinct landscape motive that has its value as such. Pictures of this kind cannot be created by man, and any scheme to fill in or cut away from these ancient cliffs tends to destroy a distinct landscape feature. From the summit of these bluffs can be seen one of the great pictures of our country, a picture of grandeur and beauty that can never be reproduced in any art gallery, a picture that has not its prototype in any other part of the world. In this picture, and constituting an inseparable part of it, are the bluffs, the river, the opposite bluffs with the Palisades, and the view up and down the Hudson. That it is even contemplated to destroy or obstruct this view or picture by the introduction of docks, wharves, and freight yards is unbelievable.

It is unfortunate that in some sections of Riverside Park the native vegetation has not been restored, that instead, vegetation has been introduced entirely foreign to this landscape; but it is to be hoped that any further embellishment in the way of planting will be towards the complete restoration of such vegetation as gives these ancient bluffs their proper dressing.

I have but few comments to make on the New York Central plans. The stockholders of this railroad corporation are looking

after their own interests—something for which no one will blame them. Their interests in this matter are financial gains; yet one would expect some of those who are citizens of New York City to show a little consideration for the things that help to make a city and its citizens worth while. The preservation of Riverside Park and its water-front is not a matter of to-day only—it is as much, if not more, a matter of to-morrow. The railroad corporation has laid its plans for the distant future at a time when it may, through lack of public interest, lay its hands upon the valuable water-front, the value of which no man can estimate at this time. The community should likewise base its plans upon the future, when the value of Riverside Park and its riparian rights will be a hundredfold what it is to-day. It is the function of the city to protect its citizens and furnish them with ways and means by which the individual may be enabled to live a decent and healthy life. Unless it fulfill this proper function, it will of necessity bring about its own destruction. The present plan of the New York Central should not be given serious consideration. *As a plan it represents only one side of the question—that of the railroad engineers.* As far as Riverside Park is concerned, the plan shows an utter disregard for the park, and for the water-front which is, as heretofore stated, an inseparable part of it. The plan contemplates practically the complete obliteration of the present character of this park with its ancient bluffs. I am willing to attribute this to ignorance rather than to a deliberate disregard for the beauty and work of nature. The matter to be considered is not the creating of new grades and slopes (entirely out of keeping and harmony with the existing topography, as shown by the plans), but of preserving the present slopes and rocky ridges, of masterly conception. From a strictly technical viewpoint, the railroad right-of-way is of such construction that it will not permit sufficient filling for the nourishment of such vegetation as should grow on these bluffs. The entire railroad right-of-way as it passes through the park will, in accordance with the present plan, be nothing but an ugly terrace, making one conscious of the fact that a railroad is below; and wherever it reaches above the level of Riverside Park, its ugliness will be still more in evidence, and will shut out the view of the Hudson River from New York's beautiful and famous drive. The roofed cover over the railroad right-of-way will

create a formal terrace entirely foreign in design, and out of harmony with the present character of the park. If landscape designing is a recognized art, then the plan as proposed is either due to ignorance, or a contemptuous disregard for those masterpieces of art in the possession of the city of Greater New York. Wrong methods are being pursued by the engineers, creating ugliness and then turning this over to the landscape architect for beautification. It is impossible to accomplish good work in this way; a combination from the start, of engineer and landscape architect, must work out the solution.

The proposed elevated playgrounds are nothing but barren fields without any possibility of being properly embellished and provided with the necessary shade from the burning midsummer sun. They are entirely out of keeping with the established methods of design for playgrounds for children. No provision has been made for proper treatment in the way of filling, between the roof over the tracks and the river-front. The plan indicates sufficient fill for the creation of a steep slope only. In accordance with the present plans, river frontage will cost the city enormous sums, quite enough to pay a great part of the expense for a depression of the railroad tracks or the tunnel outside the park under Riverside Drive asked for by citizens, and after all the expenditure for grading and filling in these lands will be absolutely at variance with what they ought to represent.

To enlarge or introduce new yards is the only thing in keeping with the present general scheme of proposed plan for agreement between the city and the New York Central Railroad Company; but that this should receive even serious consideration from the city is beyond comprehension. To intercept the wonderful view of the Palisades and the blue hills along the Hudson with railroad yards is inconceivable. There seems to be ample space south of Seventy-second Street for docks and yards, and the low depressions of Manhattanville afford a splendid place for railroad yards where they can be hidden from view and not interfere with the beauty and character of their environments. The city itself seems to have been the first aggressor on the rights of Riverside Park as such. To a visitor, the garbage dumps, yards, and ugly buildings convey the idea that the parks of New York City are held in very little esteem. It would seem that such transgression by city officers on park property

offers great encouragement to the New York Central corporation in its demands for approval of the present plan. It is rather depressing for one who visits New York to see the unloading of garbage on the only water-front that it presents to the visitor as its show place, and the exploiting billboards that shut out one of the finest views up the Hudson from Riverside Drive. These yards, docks and billboards remind the people who need this recreation park, of their daily toil and drudgery. It is necessary for a great part of the common people that the note of the out-of-doors shall be strong enough to force itself on their minds in order to do the most good—it must be driven in, deeply impressed—and these reminders of their daily grind only distract their attention and take away from the force of the picture.

All such matters, insignificant as they may seem, gradually lower the standard of the park and of the citizens, thereby opening a way for greater exploitation of additional lands and water rights. Eternal vigilance seems to be the price of citizenship. The closing of streets and thoroughfares through which the people of New York have access to the water-front should not be permitted. Why should the less fortunate amongst us in their box-like tenements be deprived of the open air necessary for the well-being of their bodies, be deprived of access to the water by having the nearby street ends closed?

I am unable to get an intelligent understanding of the report of the Ports and Terminals Committee of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment regarding the transferring of lands and water rights between the City of New York and the New York Central corporation, and therefore must refrain from making any comments on this transaction. The model plan of the railroad on exhibition in the Grand Central Station, as an example by which to judge this work, is deceiving. All such models are. They are an embellished miniature which cannot tell the actual facts nor show the real picture. The scale is so small in relation to the park it represents that it is misleading, especially to those who do not understand models or plans of that kind. The New York Central rights, whatever they may be, cannot be questioned, nor its importance as a common carrier—it has a function to perform and a very valuable one at that—yet, notwithstanding all this, there are other means by which it

may perform and carry on its business *without destroying the only valuable public water-front New York possesses in the way of a park.* From a casual observation it would seem that New York has been quite able to solve its other traction questions in a fairly satisfactory manner, more satisfactorily than other cities; and there is no doubt in my mind that the present New York Central right-of-way question through Riverside Park can be also solved in a way better and more satisfactory to all concerned than the present plan indicates. Even should the city pay part of the expense of tunneling under Riverside Drive, or of lowering the present tracks in the park, the money would be well spent, and its worth to the future citizens of New York beyond estimated millions. Perhaps the lowering of the present tracks to a depth of not less than 14 feet—a depth that will permit a covering of at least from 5 feet to 15 feet for the proper grading and planting—would be the less expensive of the two. Such a plan would keep the boldness and character of the bluffs intact and permit a scheme of low meadow landscaping over the submerged area, the only landscape feature that should be permitted, bringing out as it would the rocky bluffs to their greatest advantage. The present suggestion of landscaping the park, after the proposed plan of the New York Central has been carried out, has no merit as a work of landscape art. Have you ever considered the loss to the citizens even during the years of construction, when practically a whole park is utterly worthless as such to the community that pays? And have you considered the millions that it will cost to extend the park to the bulkhead after the railroad has built the subway? Have you the vision to see the transformation of your beautiful, natural park from beauty to ugliness? Whatever it may cost or whatever the city's share may be in carrying out this improvement, the price could not be too high for the conservation of Riverside Park in its present state, with its beautiful bluffs and rocky ridges. The flats below the bluffs would afford playgrounds for multitudes, playgrounds in the environments of those rocky bluffs, and the water and life of the Hudson in full view—a situation that *every city in the world* would envy New York! The best cannot be too good! It is never too expensive! The better it is, the greater value it is to mankind. We want the best—the best which we, as citizens of a great country, stand

for. Park values are not measured by dollars and cents, but *by their influence in the upbuilding of men and women—the future generations.* Are you willing to sacrifice this bit of native New York, in the heart of the city, within easy reach of all? Are you willing to have it reduced to mere mediocracy? To talk of "improving" the bluffs of Riverside Park is sheer nonsense. They are the work of hundreds of thousands of years, a masterpiece beyond man's dreams or his possibilities.

With the proper harbor facilities for pleasure crafts and recreation piers, Riverside Park would become the greatest asset New York could ever possess in the way of park and recreation grounds for the citizens. No other city has a park with such possibilities, such opportunities. The nearer a park is to the heart of the city, the greater its value to the citizens. The slogan of to-day is "Bring the parks to the people." Parks are the lungs of the city, and the greater the lungs and the greater number there are, the healthier the city and the better its citizens. Tens of thousands are able to reach Riverside Park with little effort, and, when compared with most parks far and away beyond them, it offers the citizens of the great metropolis the wonderful beauty of the Hudson River, the Palisades, the blue hills in the far distance to the north! It also gives to those who spend their lives in the swelter of streets and tenements a wonderful view of the river life of Greater New York. Its location makes it valuable. We *must* "bring the parks to the people" as their only means of knowing anything of nature, or of getting the benefit of the green out-of-doors. In the presence of a landscape of significance, one forgets himself, for the time being at least, and gets a new start in life, so to speak. After all, it is entirely a matter of what will do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It is to the future of New York we must look; the matter of expense is of far less consequence than is the value of the park to the community. Riverside Park should be extended north along the Hudson to the end of Manhattan Island. It would be unfortunate, indeed, to have the river-front built up with apartment houses, shutting out the view of the Hudson from the Drive and thereby lessening its value as a pleasure driveway.

Referring to the Inwood Hill park purchase, it would be a serious mistake not to include in this park the entire hill and the

water-front. This solid mass of rock is a complete landscape in itself, and should be purchased in its entirety as a landmark of primitive beauty. Any departure from this would be absolute folly. And may I suggest here that if Riverside Drive were extended all the way to Albany, it would be one of the great roads of the world! This could be done; there is enough wealth in New York State to carry out this suggestion; there are countries vastly poorer than ours who have done greater things.

In conclusion, I appeal to the intellectual lights of your city for the preservation and extension of Riverside Park; to those who lead in thought and in works, the torch-bearers of civilization in the east, as it were, who light the way for their less fortunate fellow-men and who are expected to guide the less able into a better and more beautiful life. In the broader and fuller sense of citizenship, it is expected from the intellectual members of society that their interest in their city and country shall be above the narrowness and ugliness of human exploitation. It is for them to protect and guide the other half, the ones whose defenses are weak and who plod aimlessly. No city can afford to be indifferent to the importance of parks as an inseparable part of the wholesome development of modern city life. To build cities only for human exploitation, just as a place for burning up humanity, depending on the country to send fresh supplies for the pile—this seems to be the all-important thing of to-day, without any thought for the importance of human well-being, intelligence and life, much less any regard for the future. Riverside Park is of importance to city life, not only from the standpoint of recreation, but as a masterpiece of the out-of-doors. It is one of the great mementoes of nature, and as such it is of the greatest value to the hundreds of thousands of citizens to whom this dramatic expression of mother earth is the only one they ever see. You are in duty bound to preserve this shrine of your native landscape in which those thousands may restore their souls. I maintain that if every family could make a pilgrimage several times during the year to the banks of the Hudson, it would stimulate the best that is in them, and they would be the better citizens for it. What memories to carry back home to their congested living places? Memories of that which makes life sweeter and more beautiful; memories that uplift the soul and broaden the vision, all so tragically needed by those who

pass their lives in grim tenements; memories that awaken in them their duties as citizens, and a just demand for human rights. Are you, who can escape the grind and turmoil of city life, willing to see the other half deprived of this opportunity? Are they not entitled to the best that human effort can give them? I shall always keep as one of the cherished memories of my life the picture I saw on the bluffs of Riverside Park towards the Palisades, with the blue hills of the Hudson far to the north. What an inspiration this has been to me! How much more I feel the beauty and grandeur of our country and the hidden forces that lie behind this beauty from which shall arise a new art, more human and more beautiful in conception than ever!

The plan of the New York Central calls for a freight yard as a foreground for this magnificent view, with possible docks, poorly designed buildings—a conglomeration of vulgarity insulting to the finer feeling of America. Can you imagine anything worse? There is no difference between the conception of a masterpiece out of doors or on canvas. Both must be a conception of harmony with the lightness vibrating through their composition. Are not the great masterpieces in music founded on the same principle? Evidently this is not understood by those who govern your city. The vulgar expression in the present docks and garbage disposal plants erected directly on the park river frontage, showing total disregard for common decency, is an evidence of this, and an affront to an intelligent community. On being asked to step out into a pavilion of conceded good design and in keeping with the dignity of Riverside Drive, to view the grandeur of the Hudson River landscape, to my great surprise and disgust I looked into a garbage disposal station with the air full of flying ashes and paper. Such conditions might be expected on the outskirts of civilization, but scarcely in New York. If the introduction of docks and freight yards is a discord in the park picture, a roofed and blasted river bluff certainly cannot be in accord with the present park landscape. Just as the Woolworth Building is a masterpiece of commercial architecture, so Riverside Park, and the Hudson River, with its native bluffs, compose a masterpiece of nature's architecture. A city which creates the one must have vision and courage to protect the other from ruin. What has become of the masters who

created your parks—your dignified City Hall? Where are they? Who dare demand that the standards set by them shall be lowered? Commerce is as important as art, that we know; but to sacrifice art for commerce is to sacrifice life itself. Art is beauty, and it is the beautiful things that are dear to us—that make life worth living, that engender patriotism, love for town and country. New York is the great eastern gateway to our country. It is here that the stranger gets his first impression of our country, our life, our culture; therefore, its standards in the arts and culture should be the highest.

After all, is not this preservation of Riverside Park a matter of national importance? Is it not here the great visitors to our shores are received? Is it not here that great naval pageants take place? Is it not here you invite the elite of the country to see how well you can entertain and what excellent hosts you are? From this standpoint alone, is it not desirable to maintain the present beauty and dignity of Riverside Park and add to its water-front instead of taking away from it? Riverside Park is the only piece of water-front you possess that has a distinct value in great scenic expression of our native landscape. It is here that an ancient piece of river bluffs has become an inseparable part of your city, giving that section of New York a distinct character—an individuality of its own. It is easy of access to the millions who need this out-door playground for wholesome recreation of body and mind. From the standpoint of art, it is a masterpiece, a living out-of-doors art exhibit. It is more than that—it is the last piece of primitive river bluffs left inside of the city limits of New York to tell future generations how that section of New York looked at the arrival of the white man. It is the most precious piece of park land, the foreground to one of the greatest views of this country; it affords to the citizens packed away in tenement dwellings something of an outlook into the world, something of a vision that broadens their horizon and imprints upon their souls some of the grandeur of our country. To destroy this is criminal—the city cannot afford to do it. It is in our parks the city dweller finds himself; and since it rests with him alone to make city life healthier, more beautiful and more worth while, then the greater the artistic expression from which he receives inspiration, the greater its value to mankind.

SEND TO

MR. JOSEPH HAIG, SECRETARY,

THE BOARD OF ESTIMATE AND APPORTIONMENT,

MUNICIPAL BUILDING:

As a citizen who loves Riverside Park, I respectfully but earnestly urge that any plan of agreement between the City of New York and the New York Central Railroad for the railway development along the west side of the city, shall include the preservation of the Park for the uninterrupted use of the people and the preservation and development of the water front in perpetuity for Park purposes.

.....Name

24702

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TITLE